

TENNESSEE FOLKLORE SOCIETY

BULLETIN

Contents

A Mountaineer Looks at his Own Speech . . .	p. 1
Announcements	p. 14

VOL. V

February, 1939

NUMBER 1

A MOUNTAINEER LOOKS AT HIS OWN SPEECH

One of the least significant, perhaps, but one of the most characteristic, certainly, of the indications of American romanticism is the attitude of Americans in general toward the manners or lack of them which belong to their compatriots the Allegheny mountaineers.

My purpose in this little paper is no more than to organize my own ideas on the language I have heard, and spoken, most of my life. I hope there is little in it which can be called prejudice, although I have nothing but sympathy for the old patriarch who spoke as follows, sitting on the front step of his cabin:

"I may be a-gittin' purty fur along in years, boys, and they say us old folks kinda gits funny idees, but I'll be durned if them northern fellers don't fairly wear a body out the way they nose about and ax all kinds of fool questions, like wus I ever in a feud and what kind o' games we played when we wus young'ins, and do I believe the world is round and all sich junk as that.... I'm plum wore out a-answerin' 'em. Sometimes it gits so I jist make up a lot of stuff and tell it to 'em like it wus gospel truth and they swaller it, hook, line, and sinker. I guess hit's a sin and I hadn't ort to do it, because they don't mean no harm. The'r jist sorta studyin' us, ye know, boys, because us mountain folks we ain't like nobody they ever seed afore. But I'm tellin'

ye right now they ain't like no critters I ever seed afore nother."

.....

Popular belief to the contrary, the mountaineers of the Smoky Mountain section of the Alleghenies are not predominantly Anglo-Saxon. The basis of the race, and they are a race if more than two hundred years of exclusiveness can make them so, is Anglo-Saxon. But the blood of the Germans, the Irish, the Welsh, the Scotch, the French, and the Netherlanders accounts for considerably more than half their racial stock.

However, the language which this mixed race speaks and hears is almost completely Saxon. A Yorkshire farmer would have little difficulty understanding a colleague from the slopes of the Sugarlands, and hoary grammatical forms like afeared, afore, hearn, are common property in the mountains.

The French and Latin element in English evidently made little impression on the Scotch-Irish progenitors of the Smoky Mountaineers. Occasionally we are assailed with such a word as dilitary (dilatory), and any Latin forms which may be found in the King James version of the Bible are favorites of the older mountaineers, but such words are shoved far into the background by more vivid and picturesque terms, with their roots in Old English. There are few words so characteristic as beatin'est and workin'est, which in politer so-

ciety would be strangest and most industrious. I need hazard no opinion as to which are the more expressive.

It would seem, on the face of things, that the great number of French Huguenots and "Pennsylvania Dutch" who succeeded the Cherokees in the Smokies would leave their imprint on the dialect. That they did not is evidence of the greater virility of the Saxon tongue or of the fact that the Scotch-Irish, one of the most truculent peoples of all time, showed their hatred of things furrin by refusing to accept anything from the "Dutchmen" and the "Frenchies". The German word kraut survived, for the obvious reason that there was no equivalent in the technical vocabulary of the Scotch-Irish housewife. French derivatives are more numerous, but as to what extent that is due to extensive reading of the Bible I am not prepared to say. Certainly French influence survives where it would be most expected, in the word sash-i-ate, which is a call in a dance. The mountaineer also speaks of "sashayin' around".

There are certain peculiarities of enunciation which it might be well to speak of here. For the Smoky Mountaineer the nose is as much an organ of speech as the larynx. This is particularly noticeable in old people, and may be because of the catarrh brought on by constant exposure and diseased tonsils. The mountaineer drawls to an alarming extent, even more so than his neighbors of the plantations. His voice is utterly without cadence, almost a droning monotone. On the

other hand, it has a deep, resonant quality which catarrh and embarrassment never wholly obliterate. It still makes me wonder to hear one particular lean and leathery and hawk-beaked old dweller of the forests talk. I have known him for years. But he speaks with such a slow, soft, sweet sonorousness that I forget his reputation, his habits, and his quid. There are many such as he, men and women whose voices are those of unhurried angels. Nowhere have I heard such voices save in the mountains. Plaintive, melancholy, sometimes nasal and whining to be sure, but voices which produce an insistent nostalgia when you have tired of the loose mumbling of the deep south, of the clipped sourness of the east, or of the twang like an old guitar out of tune of the Westerner.

In contrast to this softness of tone, the explosive Teutonic effect is sometimes gained for particular words by adding consonants where they do not belong. For example, a final t is sometimes added to words ending in the sound of s -- cf. twicet, oncet. Wish is usually wisht or wusht. Barnd is said for barn, borned for born, brand for bran, and shoald for shoal.

The Scotch r is very much in evidence. A mountaineer says bur-rrd, and never bu'd, for bird. As in New England, the r sound is often added to words ending in a vowel, particularly in idiomatic uses of the preposition to -- useter (used to), hafter (have to).

One very noticeable sound which, so far as I know, is peculiar to the mountaineers and their sons in Texas, Arkan-

sas, and California, is the pronunciation of y, b, and p before m and n. It reminds the listener of nothing less than the redskin's um, the subject of so much exploitation by comedians and cartoonists. A common exclamation in parts of the hills is Heb'ms! or Heavens! Leb'm is always said for eleven, and Seb'm for seven. Sump'm for something is standard.

After k and g the consonantal y is generally inserted. This is seldom noticed by a southerner, because it is common all over the south. It is not so common in the mountains as is supposed. Only a few mountaineers say cvar for car and gyarden for garden, but it would be an impossibility for most of them to pronounce cow any other way than cyow, or care any other way than kyeer or kyer.

The American tendency to use the glide after all vowels is exaggerated in the Smokies. In some cases it almost becomes ludicrous. The pronunciation of after sounds like eye-ut-er or eye-ee-ut-er or ay-ee-ut-er (accent on first syllable). Whether this is a result of the tendency to drawl or the drawl is a result of this tendency is not a question I wish to discuss here.

The standard American vowels can hardly be recognized. Nor can I find any rules or even generalities to illustrate this. The vowel sounds are simply mixed up. Thus, we hear b'ar for bear, air for our, lar for liar, wuss for worse, lootle for little, chehr for chair, cyore for cure, soush for sauce, beca'se for because, and saissy for saucy. The

only vowels we can be reasonably sure of are the so-called "long and short i's", and the diphthong oi. The first is never given the diphthongized sound, but seems to be nearer the much-disputed "intermediate a" sound. To a northerner it sounds as if the mountaineer is saying rat or rot for right, whereas in reality he is uttering a sound half-way between the two, a sound which without the glide would be immediately recognized for exactly the same sound as a "Spanish a" or a French "close a". The short sound of i is pronounced in any of three ways, as ei (eh-ee), as ay (long a), or as ai ("short a" with a glide). The other vowel sound we can be reasonably sure of, the diphthong oi, is generally pronounced as in p'intaed, h'isted, j'ined, for pointed, hoisted, joined.

In regard to grammar, very little need be said. It is simply illiterate grammar. The double negative is so prevalent that anything else sounds affected. The singular form of the noun is used after numerals, as seven year, twenty head, four gallon, etc. The prefix a- is always used before the present participle, as a-huntin', a-cryin', etc. The "indirect object, in the form of the old "Petrified Dative" is used excessively, as in "I'll git me a book", "He bought him some shoes". Never is always used in the negative pret-erite (cf. "I never seed him" for "I didn't see him"). Auxiliary verbs are often omitted in compound tenses, as in "I don hit", "I been over thar".

It must be realized that the speech of the mountaineer varies from one district to another. Thus, to give specific

examples, the old families in Cades Cove -- now in the Smoky Mountain National Park -- wherever they may have been scattered by an impersonal government, use a glottal catch between their words like the Germans and Norwegians. I have noticed this also in a few families of Wear's Valley, in Sevier County. The people of Happy Valley on the Little Tennessee use "Heb'ms!" almost universally as an exclamation of surprise. They also say come-it for come here. The people of Tuckaleechee Cove, only eight miles away as the crow flies, never use either of these expressions. And the game called "Hoopie-Hide" in Tuckaleechee is just plain "Hide-and-Seek" in Happy Valley.

Another interesting fact which should be noted is that all members of a family usually talk with the same intonations, the same vowel sounds, and the same expressions for three or four generations. In numerous families the strongest feature of resemblance between the respective members is their peculiar manner of speaking. I could mention fourteen descendants of one man, still alive, who use the same deliberate, hesitant drawl. The full importance of this tendency in these mountains, where family ties are perhaps stronger than in any other part of our land, cannot be appreciated until you ~~look~~ for it, and verify it with your own ears.

Such, in general, is the speech of the mountaineer of the great Smokies, at least from the Little Tennessee River northward to the French Broad. It seems to me that his speech has been more often distorted by authors who should

know better than has that of the Scotch. It is a strong speech, a virile speech, with an intonation like that of no other tongue, a speech which cannot be accurately transcribed, even by the International Phonetic Alphabet. It causes spasms of laughter when a northener first hears it with its full flavor, and the young people of the mountains, cursed by tourists, high schools, and the radios, are becoming ashamed of it. They do not realize that it is a symbol of their fathers -- slow, deliberate, queer, and yet charged with the dynamic virility that made America.

--Ralph S. Walker

SPECIMENS OF MOUNTAIN SPEECH
(Noted and transcribed by Mr. Walker)

Hit's allus beat me why they don't put somebydy in them
 hitz o:las b:t mi: mæðei do:nt p:t sambaidi in ðem
 towers who'd know as whut they 'us put there fur. Hit's a
 tæntz hwd no: æz matre: æz p:t te:r fur. hitz o:
 shame what them C. C. boys don't know about the woods. Hyer'
 se:m mat tæm s:s: bɔ:z do:nt no: abdut ðe wudz. hyer
 they got a man up hyer' on Look Rock, a puhfect stranger, to
 ðe gata mæn ñphyer d:n luk Rpk, a pñfïc streindzar, to
 tell us old hands whor to go when they's a far to be fit.
 tæl as o:l haenz mor ta:go: Men ðæ:za far tæ bi: fit.

Hit ain't right, I tell ye. Hyer's Jerry, an' Jeff, an'
 hit e:nt'rænt, a tæl y:. hyer z dznri, ændæt, æn
 me.-- we a:lk know the woods, we k'n tell to a T whur a far
 mi: wæj:z! no: ðe wudz, wi: kæntel tu ð t: mra far
 is. We've traimped all over these hyer' mountains sence we
 iz. wi: v ñräejmpd o:l o:vr ði:z hyer mæntænz sens wi:

wus big enough to follér air pabs. We've hunted possums,
 was big ar nat ta fa:lar fer pa:ups. Wi:v hantad pa:usamz,
 we've trapped foxes, we've laid out in the woods fer weeks
 wi:v traepd fa:kzəz, wi:v le:d aut in ðə wuds fer wi:ks
 at a time -- all th' way fr'm Jeffrias' hell to th' Cane.
 ta Raum - ðə we:fram dzefræz Heul tu:ðə ke:n.
 We k'n tell ye. But this feller, why man, th' other day he
 wi:kantel y'i: bat ðis feular, wə mæn, ðnðr de: hi:
 reported a far out on the river when it wus back up in th'
 ri:pɔ:tad ðafaraut ðə rivr Mah it was baek up in ðə
 Big Ridge. Shore beats me. 
 big ruz. so:r bi:tzm.

Pore folks has pore ways, son. An' big folks has big
 po:r foukz haez po:rwe:lz, san. ðen big foukz haez big
 ways. You may theink they don't look down on ye, but down
 weiz yu:me: ðe: dont luk daun ðn j', bat daun
 inside o' theirselves they're a-sayin' that ye ain't nothin'
 insad ðərsəuvz thñr ðe:un ðə tʃ:e:nt hnðən
 but a ol' dirty hill-billy. They don't kehr nothin' about
 bat ðəl dñrti hil-bili. ðe: do:nt kjeur hnðən abut
 us, they jes' wanna take air pitchers.
 ðs, ðe: dzes wɔ:nta:te:k aer pitʃəz.

Ye don' look much like yore gran'pap. He wus jist a
 ði do:n luk mach. lak yoir grænpaep. hi: wazj:st a
 lootle short man, but he shore wus stout. I've seed him
 lu:t! so:tmaen, bat hi: so:n wñuz stout. av sli:d him
 take a prize-pole an' roll over a rock that they ain't ho
 te:k ðə prazpol en' ro:l o:vr ðə rak at Te:int no:
 other two men in the Valley coulda moved. An' I seed 'im
 ñðr tu: min ðnna Va:li kuda mu:vd. ðen a sli:d 'im
 throw a steer oncenet an' tie 'm up withouten any he'p. He
 ðro: ð stñr wñst ðen ta 'm op wa:ðautn Eni he'p. hi:

done it on a bet. Tom Jenkins bet 'im five dollars 'e couldn't
 dnn if a:nə'bet. tom dzinkenz bet i:m fav da:lərz i Kudn
 do it, an' he tuck 'im up. Yep, boy, yore gran'pap shore wus
 du:st, aen: tñk i:m np. Jep, bñl, jo:r grāpoep so:r whz
 a man.
 a mænn

John allus said jis' what 'e thought. Oncet they 'us
 dzan alas sed dzis mati. bɔ:t. wonste:nz
 two Mormon preachers, elders 'ey called theirselves, a-comin'
 tu: mormon prı:tsırz, eldərz e: kɔ:l də:sıvvs, a:kman
 around an' trying' to convert folks to th' Mormon doctrine,
 a:raend æn traen ta kənvərt fo:kz h ðə mormon də:ktern,
 an' they walked into John Adams's yard. He wus a-choppin'
 an e: wɔ:k dnta dzan a:damzaz jə:urd. hi:wazatq:pan
 wood, but he allus tried to be friendly, and so he stopped to
 wund, bat i:c:las træd ta bi: frənlı, aen 3o:l stq:p +
 listen to whut they had to say. Atter a while when they wus
 lisan ta mut te: hed ta sei, æltərə mal matne:l waz
 expoundin' this an' that, and' provin' this an' arguin' that,
 Ekzpqundan ðis an ðent, den pruvən ðis aen a:rgi:ən ðæt,
 ol' John jist ast 'em p'int-blank:
 o:l dzan dzist aes təm pant-blaejnk:

"Be ye whut they call the Mormons?"
 bi yl MAT tei kj:ul la mormonz?

They said they wus.
 ðe: sed ðei wayz.

"Then I jist hain't got no use fer y'ins." An' he turned
 ðen a dzist he:htgə:t no: ju:sfer y:nz. ðen h:tñ
 around an' went to choppin' wood.
 ðeraund ðen went ta tṣappən wund.

Sump'm tol' me thet if I didn't move purty quicke I'd be
 Sump'm tol'mi: ðet et adidn mu:v purt, kwik ad bi:

purt' nigh drownded. An' so I jumped around an' th' poke
 part ne draunded. æn so: a dzampd æround æn ðe pok
 o' water jist missed me. An' Joe wus a-standin' 'ere,
 a water dzist mist mi. æn dzæ: wæs æstaendin' e:r,
 laifin' at me. I wisht he wus in Torment.
 læfan at mi: a wisht he wa:z in torment.

Come right in, mister, come right in! I knowed yore
 kæm rat in, mister, kæm rat in! a no:d your
 brother -- I knowed him well. They wa'n't no finer men then
 brñðar - a no:d him wel. ðe: wa:n't no:fanar min ðen
 yore brother. I said to my woman when Bob Stillwell shot
 jø:k brñðar. a sed tæma wø:man men stilwel sat
 'im -- "Woman," I says, "this valley's lost one o' hit's
 im - wø:man, a sez, ðis væuliz lɔ:st wø:na hitz
 most upstandin'est men." Come right in.
 most upstaendanst min kæm rat in.

They ain't no use to deny it --ah-- bruddern -- the
 ðe: e:nt no: jus tæ dñna it - a - brñðarn - ða
 spirit of the Lord is in me -- ah -- they ain't no use to
 spnrit av ðe lord iz in mi: - a: - ðe: e:nt no: jus ta
 deny hit -- a man that follers the Scripters ain't never
 dana hñt - e:maen ðet fñllers ðe skriptørz e:nt nevr
 gonna be let down. The Lord says, in this hyer' ol' book,
 gñna bi let down. ðe lord sez, in ðis hyer ol' buk,
 that whatsoever ye sow that shall ye also reap - ah -- and
 ðæt mætso:evrj: so: ðæt sael, j: o:iso, ri:p - a:h - den
 O, brethern, the reaping will be sore, the reaping will be
 sore!
 So:r

--From a sermon.

"Howdy, Jack, how air ye?"
 həudɪ, dzaek, hdu ɛr yɪ?

"Oh, jist so-so. Hain't feelin' so good to-day fer
 ɔ:, dzɪst so-so: heɪnt fɪ:lən sə gʊd tə:dɪ fer
 some reason."

səm reɪzən.

"I'm jist tolable myself. "hur ye goin'?"
 əm dzɪst tə:ləbəl mə:səf Mərjɪ: gə:n?

"I theink I'll go to the doctor. I, theink I got a felon
 əθɪnk ɪ lɒ:gə:tə ðə ðɒ:ktr. əθɪnk ə:gə:t ə:fən
 on my faingger."
 ən me:fɪ:ŋgər

"Thet's bad. How's yore wife?"
 θɛ:t's bæd həvz jo:r waf'

"She's purty porely too. Her rheumatiz is a-botherin'
 ʃɪ:p̩tɪ:p̩lɪ tu: hər ru:m̩atɪz zə bə:b̩rn
 her considerable."
 hər kənsɪdərbəl,

"Did she ever try what I told ye to tell 'er, about
 did ſi: eu:v̩r tra mə:tə:tə:l d̩zɪ tel ər, ə:b̩ut
 makin' a poultice outa slippery ellum, an' nen lettin' hit
 me:kən ə:p̩l̩t̩s ə:t̩sl̩p̩ri: ə:ləm, ən:n̩ lə:t̩n̩ hit
 set out in th' sun fer a coupla days, an' then tryin' hit
 set out in ə:s̩n̩ fer a kny:la deɪz, æn əθ̩v̩n̩ træ:n̩ hit
 on her knee?"
 on hər nɪ:

"No, she hain't. She ain't been able to find no slip-
 no:, ſi: heɪnt. ſi: eɪnt bɪn ə:b̩l t̩, fən no ſlip-
 pery ellum yit!"
 əry ə:ləm jɪ:t̩.

"They's some on my place. Come over an' git it. Ver.
 ə:θ̩l̩z səm ɔ:n̩ ma:p̩leɪs. Kəm o:vr ãn̩ gɪ:t̩ it. ʃə:
 welcome."
 ʃəukəm.

"Thankee, Tom, I'll do:thet. Come an' see me."
 θæ:ni:kɪ, tə:m, al du: ə:t̩. Kəm ən̩ si: mi.

Cain't go now, I guess. Come an' see me."
Keint go: nau, ægɛs. kəm æn sɪ: mi:.

--A typical conversation.

TENNESSEE FOLKLORE SOCIETY BULLETIN

Volume V

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The Southeastern Folklore Society
Meeting

We are privileged to give here the program of the Fourth Annual Meeting of the Southeastern Folklore Society to be held March 31 and April 1 at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville.

Friday, March 31.
2:30 P. M.

Welcome: President James D. Hoskins
Response: Dean Reed Smith, University of South Carolina
Address: Miss Gertrude Knott, Director of National Folk Festival, "Why a National Folk Festival?"
Songs: Mr. Jack Moore, Knoxville
Address: Mr. B. A. Botkin, Folklore Editor, Federal Writers' Project, "Folklore for Whom?"
Spirituals: Knox College Quartet

8:15 P. M.

Lecture: Dr. James Carpenter

Admission: fifty and twenty-five cents

Saturday, April 1

9:30 A. M.

Address: Mr. Ralph Walker, Townsend, Tennessee,
"A Mountaineer Looks at His Own Speech"

Folk Dances: Miss Dorothy Koch, University of Tennessee

Address: Mr. Edwin R. Hunter, Maryville College,
"Studying Proverbs"

Address: Professor George P. Wilson, Woman's College of the University of North Carolina, "Survivals of Early English in North Carolina Dialects"

Folk Dances: Mr. L. L. McDowell

1:00 P. M.

Annual Luncheon: Andrew Johnson Hotel

Ballads: Mr. Buck Fulton

Address:

Business Meeting

The Leading Article

The article on Mountain Speech and the specimens which accompany it in this issue is by Mr. Ralph S. Walker, Principal of the High School at Townsend, at one of the gateways to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. We are glad to have this article for our Bulletin and are particularly pleased to have the careful phonetic transcription from a qualified observer. The editor notes the consistency with which Mr. Walker reports the sound spelled j in such words as Jake and judge as dz rather than as dʒ. Have other observers heard it so?

Bibliography

In the eight issues of the Bulletin which comprise Volumes III and IV we have carried bibliographical notes prepared by Mr. Hill Shine, of Maryville College. These notes taken together represent a careful and comprehensive statement of the recent writings on subjects of folklore interest: folk tales; folk beliefs, customs, etc.; folk songs; and proverbs. This service rendered the Society by Mr. Shine has been of the highest value, and he has our hearty thanks for his careful work.

At least for the present, however, this bibliographical

section will be discontinued, since the same ground is being covered adequately by the bibliographies in the Journal of American Folklore (quarterly bibliographical notes since 1936) and the annual bibliography, prepared by Mr. R. S. Boggs, in the March issue of the Southern Folklore Quarterly (since 1938).